

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 001723

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/14/2015

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [KISL](#) [MOPS](#) [YM](#)

SUBJECT: SAADA REBELLION FOCUSES ATTENTION ON YEMEN'S ZAYDI SHIA

Classified By: DCM Nabeel Khoury for reasons 1.4 b and d.

1. (C) Summary. The on-going Shabab al-Moumineen (Believing Youth) rebellion against the Yemeni regime has brought international attention to Yemen's Zaydi Shia population. The line between Sunni and Shia is blurred in Yemen; Sunnis and Shiites pray in the same mosques, and identity is derived from tribe rather than sect. Confusion exists even among Yemenis on what it actually means to be Zaydi, and about the difference between Zaydi teachings and the fundamentalist theology of Badr Eddine al-Houthi, founder of the Believing Youth. Although the conflict between the ROYG and the Shabab is political and not religious in nature, the fighting in Saada has stirred up questions about the nature of the Sunni-Shia divide in Yemen, and whether or not it exists at all. End Summary.

Yemen's Zaydi Shia

2. (U) Approximately 75 percent of Yemenis are Sunni Muslims of the Shafi'i school. The Remaining 25 percent are Shia of the Zaydi sect. Among Shia, Zaydis are considered the most moderate and the closest to Sunni theology. Zaydi's believe neither in the infallibility of the Imams, nor in their divine guidance.

3. (U) Zaydis come from the "fiver" school of Shia, based on the belief that there were only five legitimate Imams following the death of the Prophet Muhammed. The overwhelming number of Yemeni Zaydis reside in the northern governorates -- the seat of tribal power. The regime's ruling elite, including President Saleh, Speaker of Parliament Abdullah al-Ahmar, and General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, are of Zaydi origin. Until the Yemen Revolution defeated the Imamate in 1962, Zaydi Imams ruled Yemen. Members of the ruling family, referred to as &Sayed,8 claimed to be Hashemites or direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammed.

----- --
Shia and Sunni in Yemen: What's the Difference?
----- --

4. (C) Yemen's Zaydis and Shafi'is pray in the same mosques and practice the same customs. Yemen's Zaydis do not celebrate Ashura, the holiest of Shia occasions, with the traditional solumn procession and self-flagellation witnessed in other Arab contries. Last year in Sanaa, Ashura was celebrated with a fireworks display. On matters of Islamic law, Zaydis are actually closer to Sunni Shafi'i beliefs than to other Shia sects. Zaydis in Yemen have no significant institutional relationships or ties to the world's preeminent Shia leaders and their organizations -- Lebanon's Sheikh Fadlallah, Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Sistani, and Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Khamenei.

5. (C) Unlike other nations with significant Shia minorities, Yemen has no history of a distinct Shia community with its own religious, social, or political agenda. Zaydi Sheikh al-Ahmar heads the Islamic-based reform party Islah, and powerful Commander of the Northwestern Region, General Ali Mohsen, is known for his Salafi fundamentalist beliefs. Both are Zaydi, yet hold leadership positions in Sunni political and religious movements.

----- --
Shabab al-Moumineen: What Sort of Shia are They?
----- --

6. (SBU) The "Shabab" follow the teachings of slain rebel leader Hussein Badr Eddin al-Houthi, who is from a prominent Zaydi and Hashemite family. Al-Houthi's teachings can be described as "homemade" twelver Shia, the mainstream Shia found in Iran and throughout the Middle East. Al-Houthi studied at the Badr Religious Center, founded with Saleh's tacit endorsement by Yemeni theologian al-Hatwari in 1997. Hatwari taught the twelver brand of Shia, elements of which al-Houthi took back to followers in Saada - with a Royal twist. Al-Houthi preached that only descendant of a Hashemite family from the Sayed class (such as himself) could be a legitimate ruler of Yemen. When this belief was made public, it naturally drew the attention of the regime.

Shia Leaders in Iraq and Iran Condemn ROYG

17. (U) Misunderstanding about Yemeni Zaydi practices and beliefs have led some in the regional and international communities to view the Saada conflict as Sunni versus Shia. In response to a letter from al-Houthi the father, Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a statement in May condemning the ROYG for the "brutal massacre" of Shia in Saada. The Najaf Muslim Council also described the regime's efforts to put down the al-Houthi rebellion as a "war on Shia Islam."

18. (C) Head of the Qom Religious Seminary in Iran, Grand Ayatollah Musavi-Ardabili, referred to ROYG efforts to defeat the insurgency as "the slaughter of women and children solely for being Shiite." The Iranian response led to a hastily arranged visit to Tehran by Foreign Minister Qirbi on May 24-25. A senior member of Qirbi's staff told Pol/Econ Chief following the FM's return that the purpose of Qirbi's visit was to correct Iranian misperceptions about the nature the Saada conflict.

Qirbi Sets the Record Straight

19. (C) Qirbi's message to Tehran appears to have had an effect. Iranian Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Hassan Rawhani, visited Sanaa to meet ROYG officials less than two weeks after Qirbi's trip. In a public statement on June 9 Rawhani emphasized that "the Iranian Government could not be held responsible for statements made by Iranian Clergy." (Comment: leaving aside that the clergy in Iran run the Government, Rawhani's comment signals Tehran is distancing itself from claims that Sadaa conflict is a war against Shia. End Coment.)

110. (C) Comment. The al-Houthi rebels' ultimate political goal is unclear. Statements and writings of both Hussein Badr Eddin al-Houthi, killed at the end of the first phases of the conflict last summer, as well as those of his father Hussein, suggest that they favor the revival of the Imanate theocracy with an anti-western twist. The ROYG claims that al-Houthi followers envision an Islamic Regime based on the Islamic Republic of Iran. So far, the insurgency's biggest accomplishment is being a serious thorn in Saleh's side. More than just an irritant, the al-Houthi movement has forced the regime to divert considerable military resource and political attention to the countering the "Shabab." End Comment.
Khoury